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ON PAGE 1-B

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The French overseas department of Guadeloupe is one of a semicircle of stepping-stone islands stretching from Puerto Rico to Venezuela and dominating the eastern approaches to the Caribbean.

In Communist hands, it would form an iron triangle with Cuba and Nicaragua and turn the Caribbean into a Red sea. Its strategic importance to the United States cannot be overestimated.

The grim fact, which seems to have escaped the notice of the Pentagon and the National Security Council, is that Guadeloupe is well on its way to becoming the third Soviet bastion in the Western Hemisphere. It has — as Vitaly Yurchenko, the high-ranking KGB defector, warned before redefecting — top priority in the Soviet geopolitical scheme. KGB operatives, Cuban arms, and a small but aggressive terrorist movement are already in place, waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

But, tragic to say, the Socialist government of French President Francois Mitterrand is unwilling to do anything about it. His closest adviser on Latin America is Regis Debray, the Communist "newspaperman" who operated with Che Guevara to bring revolution to several South American countries. At several stormy secret meetings of the French Cabinet, Mr. Mitterrand has stated categorically that France will do nothing to prevent the planned Soviet onslaught.

U.S. intelligence services — according to some invidious reports uncertain as to whether Guadeloupe is in the Caribbean or the Indian Ocean — are too busy fending off attacks from the media and Con-

The next Soviet bastion?

gress to take countermeasures. And they are intimidated by strong signals from France that any attempt to repeat our successful performance in Grenada will be viewed by President Mitterrand as a breach of French sovereignty and passionately opposed.

The small group of terrorists has made no secret of its intention to turn the island into a "Soviet Guadeloupe." Its published manifestos outline specifically what they will do when they have achieved "independence" from France. To achieve this "separation" — something the vast majority of the people oppose — the Communists have mounted a growing campaign to terrorize the people, immobilize the *mablos* (police), and wreck the economy.

Leading this band of KGB-directed terrorists is one Thimanon. Arrested after one of his violent incursions about a year ago, he was tried and convicted. He escaped from prison and now moves openly on the island, giving well-publicized dinners at restaurants in Pointe-a-Pitre and other municipalities. According to the Guadeloupean police, there are tacit orders from Paris not to take him into custody. They also know that he would "escape" again and take his vengeance on their families. "We have been disavowed," the police say.

At present, Guadeloupe's school system is controlled by the Communists. There have been strong protests from parents who object to the systematic indoctrination of their children, but to no avail. The government radio station repeatedly opens its channels to Communist propagandists, but shuts out the voices of those who oppose the brand of "independence" preached by the terrorists. The trade unions and the church try to combat the Communists, but without the support of the central government in Paris, they are helpless.

Those few people who have the courage to try to organize against the Communists are beaten, deprived of their livelihood, and driven off the island. Their pleas to the Mitterrand government are ignored. And the racist nature of the terrorist movement was spelled out in a recent broadcast in which they boasted: "That we must fire on black police is regrettable, but to shoot white police is completely normal."

The terrorists, moreover, have found a way to force the people to finance the "revolution." Recently, the Communist mayor of Pointe-a-Pitre, Guadeloupe's largest city, rammed a bond issue through the Socialist-Communist city council. Subsequently, the council authorized the sale of these municipal bonds, valued at Fr. 58,000 each, to the mayor and his Communist colleagues at Fr. 100. So the Communists now, in effect, own the city but are financing terrorist activities with the income on the bonds.

The parallels with Grenada are clear. But there is one frightening difference. In Grenada, those opposing the Communists had some tacit support from the British government and its representative. In Guadeloupe, democratic forces loyal to France know that Mr. Mitterrand's Socialists have turned their backs on the island.

The only hope the people of Guadeloupe have is that President Mitterrand's hands will be tied by an electoral defeat next year — if, of course, the Communists and the KGB hold off that long.

Ralph de Toledano is a nationally syndicated columnist.